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SIPDIS

CAIRO FOR J. MAXSTADT

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: TENSIONS MOUNT LEADING TO THE APRIL 19 ELECTION

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter for reason 1.5 (d).

11. (C) Summary: Despite a crowded house of 19 Presidential candidates, the April 19 contest boils down to President Obasanjo and ANPP candidate Muhammadu Buhari. Holding the ace of incumbency, Obasanjo is the likely, but not guaranteed, victor. He has been put on the defensive by recent events such as the protracted gas shortage. The shortage and other problems served to painfully remind the Nigerian people that Obasanjo's first term did not produce the expected economic "dividends of democracy." Meanwhile, Buhari started slowly and appeared direction-less yet seemed to find his political compass in the later stages of the campaign. Results from the April 12 National Assembly elections give the PDP a majority of the votes nation-wide while ANPP support is mostly limited to the North. These results add some lift to Obasanjo's presumed lead. However, Buhari and the other opposition parties have alleged systematic vote manipulation. Buhari is meeting with other aggrieved political leaders to discuss an eleventh hour alliance. If the desired deals are struck, the dynamics of the presidential election could change materially from the April 12 contest. In any event, April 19 will be a tense, historic day that severely tests the very fiber of Nigerian democracy. End Summary.

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For Obasanjo - An Election Not Soon Enough  
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12. (C) In retrospect, President Obasanjo would have wished this election occurred in late January. In an election immediately after the January PDP and ANPP conventions, Obasanjo would have carried the day handsomely. At that point, the gap between him and Buhari was wide and appeared unbridgeable. Conventional wisdom was that the PDP convention was the real test (exactly what Obasanjo said to the Ambassador at that time); the general election would be close to a formality that had to be observed but not worried about. On the domestic political front, things were relatively quiet after the conventions. There were no crises and the Administration was looking forward to a minor windfall because of oil prices elevated by the storm gathering over Iraq.

13. (C) Conversely, Buhari did not seem to know what to do with the ANPP nomination once he had it. Moreover, the denouement of the ANPP convention had been clumsy and fractious. While Buhari was selected as a "consensus" candidate, the consensus was hollow. Several rival ANPP candidates boycotted the convention; their widely broadcast walkout gave the appearance that the orchestrated PDP convention was actually fairer than the ANPP's.

14. (C) Buhari seemed ineffectual as a campaigner. His campaign hibernated for weeks; his major negatives stuck to him, no matter how loudly he disclaimed his past misdeeds and missteps. While incorruptible when it came to personal integrity, he was feared by many to be intolerant as a public leader. He was viewed as a religious and regional bigot more suited to be a third party candidate who could energize the Northern "protest", populist vote than to be the flagbearer of the main opposition. Many people thought Buhari could win the Northwest without getting out of bed, but would lose the other five zones, especially the three in the South, no matter how hard he tried. That his campaign appeared dormant only confirmed this assessment; it seemed Buhari had already conceded his was a cause that could only end in defeat.

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But Things Fall Apart  
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15. (C) Obasanjo's relative good fortune did not last; neither did Buhari's somnolence. Despite higher than expected oil prices, the national economy reminded everyone that it was sick; the government's morbidity was equally patent. The President and National Assembly bickered over the Anti-Corruption Commission in between their cross exchanges over the 2003 budget. Obasanjo and the lawmakers could not reconcile their differences over the oil dichotomy bill and special derivative income for oil producing states. People in the South-South states started to get edgy when many state and local governments failed to pay salaries for months. Unionized workers, including federal and state civil servants, threatened to strike to force the GON to honor the 12.5% pay raise the National Labour Congress said the GON had promised. By late February, too much was going wrong. It appeared the country was being yanked from pillar to post, from problem to problem.

16. (C) In late March, things went from bad to worse. The fuel shortage brought back marathon gas lines, longer and more intractable than those in Abacha times. The fuel crunch caused transportation and food prices to rise, further pinching the too-lean wallet of the average Nigerian. Moreover, the thousands of Nigerians who had to wait hours in long gas lines, sometimes for days, could not be overly enthralled with the incumbent government that failed to spare them from this ordeal. Then, the ethnic crisis in Warri spilled into the oil fields. Well-armed ethnic Ijaw militants rendered these rich oil installations inoperable, reducing Nigeria's daily output by over forty percent and completely cutting crude flows to those refineries still operating. For a government that derives over eighty percent of its revenues from selling oil, the reduction had the makings of potential economic disaster. At a time when Obasanjo should have been demonstrating his mastery of the ship of state, the general impression was that the President's grip had become unsteady and the country was veering out of his control.

17. (C) While Obasanjo was being sorely tested, Buhari was imperceptibly moving from weakness to relative strength. His humble coffers forced him into a lean campaign. He had to pick his spots judiciously; by starting late however, Buhari's campaign had an unexpected salutary effect; because he was not visible early, the public did become inured with him. Moreover, his slowness to campaign and failure to splash money around in the traditional political mode, once seen as a demerit, turned into virtue. His campaign stops -- little reported in official media and much of the Lagos-based press -- drew tens of thousands without need for the financial inducement that was slowly making a mockery of well-publicized PDP events. It all reinforced the notion that Buhari, although a former Head of State, was a new breeze -- that he would not conduct business as usual because he was not a full-fledged member of the country's discredited and venal political elite.

18. (C) Consequently, as Buhari started to campaign more actively, he cashed in on his image as the upright politician, the acme of rectitude. More people came to see him as a man who might be able to impart some of his legendary self-control onto an unruly nation. Conversely, Obasanjo was seen as drifting from crisis to crisis, shackled by an Administration racked by corruption and incompetence. Faced with the emergencies of today, many people forgot the excesses of Buhari's past. While Obasanjo fiddled or was unconcerned because he and his cronies had fuel, Buhari would do something to end the gas lines. Many people began to identify with Buhari because he was not a man of great privilege or wealth. To some degree, he began to connect with the common man in places outside the North. While there were still deep reservations about Buhari's perceived ethnic and religious chauvinism, and his past performance as a mediocre Head of State, perhaps that connection would turn to votes.

19. (C) Going into the April 12 National Assembly election, it appeared that Obasanjo was leading but with Buhari gaining ground. A close race seemed unlikely but possible. Nigeria was tense going into the election. Uncertainty was in the air. Could INEC do it? Would there be violence? Generally, the conduct at the polls on election day went reasonably well by local standards. Also, the very act of casting votes was partially cathartic for the general public. Consequently, there was a temporary relaxation of tensions that would have redounded to Obasanjo's benefit had his party not over-reached. Instead, Nigeria's journey through this week would be more like a frenetic roller-coaster than a certain, well driven road.

¶10. (C) With election results showing the PDP maintaining its National Assembly majority and gaining over 50 percent of the nation-wide vote (its majority in the Senate likely will grow significantly), opposition parties vociferously assailed the process. They accused the PDP, INEC and the Army of massive, systematic vote manipulation. There were scores of reports of pre-stuffed replica ballot boxes. Some of these stories are probably just that, but many of them are credible and almost certainly true. The ANPP claimed an accurate vote count would have perhaps given them a majority of National Assembly seats and definitely much more than the 27 percent vote nationwide that INEC results indicate. Chairmen of several opposition parties met April 15, issuing a press statement rejecting the vote.

¶11. (C) On April 17, Buhari flew to Lagos to meet with AD leaders who feel equally aggrieved by the PDP's massive gains in the Southwest. The AD, and especially Afinefere, are literally fighting for their lives. Having been effectively ejected from its only political home base, the AD has nowhere to go except toward irrelevance unless it can retain its gubernatorial seats on April 19. The Yoruba-dominated party thought it had a deal with the PDP that would protect incumbents in the Southwest in exchange for AD votes in the presidential contest. In earnest of that, the AD did not present a candidate for the presidential race. Now, AD leaders worry that voters will abandon the AD governors to join the PDP bandwagon, dooming the party and its socio-political underpinning, - Afinefere. Whether INEC results of the April 12 elections generally reflect the way Southwesterners actually voted seems to be of little importance at this juncture.

12 (C) These developments portend an April 19 election that will be significantly more tense than the National Assembly election of a week ago. Tensions will be accentuated further because gubernatorial races in hotly contested states, such as Plateau, Anambra, Kwara and Rivers will be that same day.

¶13. (C) The opposition parties are afraid that, if they do not challenge INEC's conduct of last week's elections, the results on April 19 will mirror the April 12 vote tally. If so, Obasanjo is assured of victory. The PDP has over 50 percent of the April 12 vote; while the AD pulled in just 12 percent. Although the AD has backed out of its pact to support Obasanjo, many AD members will still support him out of ethnic loyalty. A portion of AD support would give Obasanjo a vote percentage comfortably in the upper 50's. Meanwhile, the ANPP is hovering around 27 percent nationally, with the vast majority coming from the Northwest. However, the ANPP is registering less than 25% in 18, mostly southern, states. If this low Southern tally holds for the presidential election, Buhari will be utterly unelectable. The constitution not only requires a winner to attain a national plurality, he must also receive 25% of the vote in two-thirds of the 27 electoral jurisdictions (36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory). Based on the April 12 results, Buhari can count on only 18 states.

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Comment  
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¶14. (C) The controversy produced by the National Assembly Election may cause an eleventh-hour shift in alignments. First, the crumbling of the AD/PDP pact could cost Obasanjo significant support in the Southwest. Yet, while Buhari is meeting with AD leaders, Obasanjo has also reached out to the AD; but right now, the trust between Obasanjo and the AD is gone. Conceivably the AD could swing its influence to Buhari or at least instruct followers not to vote for Obasanjo. Yet given ethnic loyalty and the support of the Yoruba's most senior traditional leaders, Obasanjo will likely carry the Southwest, but his margin may be reduced. Second, the ANPP may be able to increase the voter turn-out in the North. Third, Igbo favorite son candidates such as the APGA's Ojukwu, NDP's Nwachukwu and UNPP's Nwobodo, could take a healthy share of the votes in the Southeast, a PDP stronghold in 1999. Alternatively, the three could throw their support to Buhari in protest against the alleged manipulation of the April 12 exercise. Fourth, there is the immeasurable protest factor among the general public. There could be a turnout of voters who, in reaction to the allegations of vote manipulation, decide to vote for Buhari.

¶15. (C) A combination of three of these four possibilities would be needed to force a close race. This concatenation is unlikely, yet it cannot be dismissed. However, at this

stage, Obasanjo appears to be the much safer bet, although that outcome will be messy.

JETER